



You are here.

I am here with you.

Figure 1. Image from *A Month of Single Frames* (dir. Lynne Sachs, US, 2019). Courtesy of the author

## Thoughts on Making Films with Barbara Hammer

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Lynne Sachs

Barbara Hammer and I met in 1987, at a time when the Bay Area was affordable enough to become a mecca for alternative, underground, experimental filmmaking. She taught me the fine, solitary craft of optical printing during a weekend workshop, thus beginning a friendship that eventually followed us across the country to New York City. We were able to see each other often during the last few years of her life. Between 2015 and 2017, Barbara agreed to be part of the making of my short experimental documentary *Carolee, Barbara and Gunvor* (US, 2018), a three-part film that also includes Carolee Schneemann and Gunvor Nelson. I met all three women in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the San Francisco experimental film community and kept in close touch with each of them, both in person and through virtual correspondences, for many years. All three were renowned artists and beloved friends, just a generation older than I, who had embraced the moving image throughout their lives. From Carolee's eighteenth-century house in the woods of upstate New York to Gunvor's village in Sweden to Barbara's West Village studio, I shot

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film with each woman in the place where she found grounding and spark.

Barbara believed that I would see her at her best on a Tuesday, the day of the week in which she would be most energetic after her chemotherapy treatments. That afternoon, I directed Barbara to run along a fence as fast as she could toward the camera, without realizing that I had calibrated the f-stops on my camera to reveal the shadow from the fence across her body, creating a fabulous series of stripes in the resulting image. I returned to Barbara's studio during another chemo period. As we stood together holding our cameras, I thought about her films *Sanctus* (1990) and *Vital Signs* (1991), which she was making when we first met in San Francisco. In Barbara's prescient words, these films "make the invisible, visible, revealing the skeletal structure of the human body as it protects the hidden fragility of interior organ systems."<sup>1</sup> That afternoon in her studio, Barbara picked up one heavy 16mm camera after another. She then proceeded to dance with her furniture, embracing that robust physicality so many of us associate with her performative work. In this, my first collaboration with Barbara, I had the chance to photograph her trademark interactions with absolutely any object she could get her hands on. For both of us, these moments of creative intimacy became the gift we somehow expected from our open, porous art-making practice. We both wanted more, and by 2018 Barbara had figured out the way to make it happen.

Barbara asked me to come to her home to discuss something she needed to say in person. I immediately faced a complicated set of emotions. This was around the time she gave the talk "The Art of Dying or (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety)" at the Whitney Museum. Inspired by Rainer Marie Rilke's book *Letters to a Young Poet*, she ruminated on the experiences of living with advanced cancer while making art. In her performative lecture, she shared examples from her art-making practice and deeply considered, lucid thoughts on her experience of dying. I knew that this tête-à-tête would involve some kind of goodbye, but I had no idea that she had decided to share with me a part of her personal archive, and thus a part of her being on this earth. Filmmaking, in the tradition that Barbara and I have espoused for most of our lives

as experimental makers, involves a deeply focused solitary period of introspection. A complementary aspect of our practice, however, calls for playful, engaged exchanges with all of the people in the film—both in front of and behind the camera. Fundamental to Barbara's sense of herself as an artist was her commitment to deep and lasting intellectual engagement with her fellow artists in the field, particularly other women who were also trying to find an aesthetic language that could speak about the issues that meant so much to us. By asking me to work with her, alongside her but not for her, Barbara, a feminist filmmaker, was actually creating an entirely new vision of the artist's legacy.

As I sat at her side in the apartment she shared with her life partner, Florrie Burke, she explained to me that she had obtained funding from the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, for this endeavor. There was money and postproduction support for her to invite three other filmmakers (Deborah Stratman, Mark Street, and Dan Veltri) to complete films from her archive of unfinished projects. Barbara vividly described to me her 1998 artist residency in Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. For one month, she lived and made her art in a shack without running water or electricity. While in her Dune Shack, as it is still called, she shot 16mm film with her Beaulieu camera, made field recordings, and kept a journal. Barbara's only instructions to me were very simple: "Do absolutely whatever you want with this material."

Knowing her work as I did, it was not surprising to me that she was able to face her imminent death in this open, intimate, transparent, and sensual way. From *Sanctus* and *Vital Signs*—both of which excavated her own shock and sadness in the face of the AIDS epidemic—to *Evidentiary Bodies* (2018), which confronted and embraced her own cancer, Barbara developed a precise visual aesthetic that traced her own relationship to her end. Whether she was using her phenomenal optical printing and matting techniques in the studio or performing for the camera, she found an astonishingly inventive cinematic language to explore the resonances of both disease and death. It was with *Evidentiary Bodies*, her final work that was at the core of her Whitney talk, that she so eloquently witnessed her departure.

About that film, Barbara wrote of herself in the third person: “The work is experienced and perceived through the performer’s body as we breathe together remembering that cancer is not a ‘battle,’ cancer is a disease. There are aberrant cells, not ‘deadly foes.’ She is not ‘combative’ and ‘brave,’ she is living with cancer. She is not going to win or lose her ‘battle.’ She is not a ‘survivor,’ she is living with cancer. There is not a ‘war’ on cancer; there is concentrated research.” Barbara always had an uncanny ability to understand herself from the inside out *and* from the outside in. Her films are visceral and personal. They are also exhilaratingly political. As I read through Barbara’s Dune Shack journal, I noticed that she referred to herself in the first and the third person, moving from *I* to *she*.

This morning I began the film. I didn’t shoot it. I saw it. The dark triangular shadow of the shack out the west end window of the upstairs bedroom would shrink and disappear as I sat sweating, single-framing second by second.

She had turned 60 today. She was almost the age her mother was when she died, regretful of not living her dreams and desires out into an old age. How resentful she would feel were she to die three years from today. Die without having had her pet dog, her country home, her long lazy days gardening and walking in the yard. Die without knowing the outcome of her partner’s work. The sadness of departure. The inevitable ending of breath and blood coursing. The complete and thorough blankness. “Is this why we make busy,” she wondered, “so that we won’t have time or space to contemplate the heart wrenching end to this expanse called life?”

While writing the text for my own film, the words I placed on the screen came to me in a dream the day I was to begin my final edit at the Wexner Center. By this time Barbara had died. I quickly realized that this kind of oneiric encounter could become a post-humous continuation of the dialogue I had started with Barbara the year before, during the making of *Carolee, Barbara and Gunvor*. Since I would never again be able to speak to her about her life or the ontological nature of cinema or the textures of a sand

dune, I would converse with her through *A Month of Single Frames*, the title I chose for my fourteen-minute film. Through my writing, I tried to address Barbara's celebration of solitude and cinematic embodiment. Ultimately, my text on the screen over Barbara's images functions as a search for a cinematic experience that brings us all together in multiple spaces at once. It is also an embrace of an ambiguous second-person *you* who might be Barbara herself or might be anyone watching the film.

This is how I see you.

This is how you see yourself.

You are here.

I am here with you.

This place is still this place.

This place is no longer this place. It must be different.

You are alone.

I am here with you in this film.

There are others here with us.

We are all together.

*Time less yours mine*

Barbara's imprint on my own filmmaking practice is profound. I observed in her work a conscious physical relationship to the camera. For the most part, she shot her own films and in turn found her own distinct visual language for talking about women's lives, liberation, love, struggle, awareness, and consciousness. Discovering Barbara's films released something in my own camera-work; my images became more self-aware and more performative. Thinking about Barbara's radical, improvisational, and totally physical cinematography continues to push me to dive deeply and fully into my body as I am shooting.

In *Carolee, Barbara and Gunvor*, I brought Barbara together on screen with two other pioneers of the American avant-garde. In an email, she wrote these words to me after seeing the film for the first time: "Hi Lynne, I had a chance to watch your lovely film! I was surprised at how energetically I performed for your camera. I'm honored to be grouped with such strong and remarkable film-

makers. Love, Barbara.” As aware of each other as they were of themselves, the film’s two other subjects also acknowledged her. Carolee, who sadly died shortly before Barbara, wrote, “I loved seeing Barbara with those old Bolex cameras,” and Gunvor commented on how “Barbara moves so fast and vigorously as she walks toward the camera!”

These two films are my gifts to these women and to our shared audiences. *Carolee, Barbara and Gunvor* and *A Month of Single Frames* together attempt to reveal the great mind-body weave of Barbara Hammer’s life: her commitment to cinematic embodiment, her openness about dying, and her deeply held desire to find common space for women of all generations.

#### Note

1. Barbara Hammer, *Sanctus* (Electronic Arts Intermix, description of 16mm film, 1990).

**Lynne Sachs** makes films that defy genre through the use of hybrid forms and cross-disciplinary collaboration, incorporating the essay film, collage, performance, documentary, and poetry. Her work investigates the implicit connection between the body, the camera, and the materiality of film itself. Lynne discovered her love of filmmaking while living and studying in San Francisco, where she worked closely with artists Barbara Hammer, Gunvor Nelson, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Her early experimental works on celluloid took a feminist approach to the creation of images and writing—a commitment that has grounded her body of work ever since. See [www.lynnesachs.com](http://www.lynnesachs.com).